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THE PROBLEM OF THE ORIGIN OF SERFDOM IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

By MICHAEL ROSTOVTZEFF

IN a periodical devoted to the land question in general, both to the actual status of the problem and to its history, nobody would be surprised to find an article dealing with the problem of serfdom. The colonate was the leading form of land tenure for centuries both in Europe and in the Near East; and some parts of Europe became rid of it quite recently. The colonate, in a form modified by socialism, might come up again. Who knows? We saw a beginning of it in Bolshevik Russia, in the period of the militant communism. I have dealt with the question of the Roman colonate repeatedly: in many articles, in my German book *Studien zur Geschichte des römischen Kolonats*, and recently in my *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*. Since the question has lately been taken up again by some American scholars,¹ and a solution was suggested which is not based on facts and does not take into account the historical evolution and which, therefore, I must reject, I find it appropriate briefly to state my views on the question again. The treatment of the question in this article is historical, and so it must be in all the books and articles devoted to this problem.

I. Serfdom in the Orient and Greece

Serfdom is an institution of social and economic life which was widely spread

over Europe in a not very remote past, and still persists both in the Orient and, in survivals, in some parts of eastern Europe, especially in Russia. It assumes various forms in various periods and countries, but its main aspect remains invariable. By serfdom is meant the situation of a person who is personally and legally free but is tied to his place of residence and to his work, a bondage which is recognized and protected by the state. In agricultural life the serf is not the owner of his land, and though bound to the parcel of land which he is tilling and to his place of residence, he might be deprived of this parcel by the will of his landlord, whoever he might be. In industry, serfdom appears more rarely but has the same peculiar features. The serf does not own his implements and his house, and is bound to his work.

From the earliest times of which we have historical records, that is, since the beginnings of historical life, we meet serfdom as a recognized institution all over the civilized world. It is the base of the economic and political structure of many an Oriental monarchy (the best known is Egypt); it appears as an institution familiar to the Oriental and Greek city-state (Carthage, Sparta, Thessaly, the cities of the island of Crete, some Greek cities of Asia Minor); and it is not unknown to some tribal states, for instance, the Celtic and the Illyrian states. Of the origin of these various forms of serfdom we know very little, and what we are supposed to know and what is generally

¹ Simkhovitch, in *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. XXXI, 1916, pp. 201 ff.; and his pupil, R. Clausen, *The Roman Colonate*, 1925.

taught is mere guesswork. It seems as if serfdom in the Oriental monarchy was the natural consequence of the peculiar social and political conditions which arose both in Egypt and Babylonia out of the necessity of a strict organization of agricultural labor for the maintenance and development of the prosperity of the country. State and religion are inseparable in the Oriental state, the king being the representative of the God on earth; and, therefore, the institution of serfdom ultimately expresses the idea of the supreme rule of the God over man. This primarily religious aspect of serfdom, which implies the notion of the ownership by God of both the land and those who live on the land and who till it, is most evident in many, though not in all, temple- or priest-states where religious and political organization never become differentiated. Such states existed in rather large numbers all over the Orient until very late times. Sometimes, though incorporated in a state of a different secular form, they nevertheless retained their peculiar social and economic organization (for instance, the temple of Comana in the Pontus in the time of Strabo and many other temples in Asia Minor described by the same author).

In the Oriental and Greek city-states the origin of serfdom is equally unknown. It seems as if in Carthage serfdom, as far as it developed there, was based on the conquest of the native population by the Phenician conquerors. And this is the prevailing theory by which the origin of serfdom, as it existed in early times all over Greece and Greek Asia Minor, is commonly explained. The institution as such is comparatively well known since it persisted until late Hellenistic times in Sparta, in Thessaly, in Crete, and in some cities of Asia Minor and South

Russia. However, some scholars deny such an origin of serfdom in the Greek city-states and are inclined to ascribe its evolution to the gradual enslavement of the poor by the rich, a theory which to my mind is untenable.

Equally unknown is the origin of serfdom in the tribal states. Our historical tradition, which is not untrustworthy, ascribes the existence of serfdom in the Illyrian states of Dalmatia to the conquest of early Thracian inhabitants by Illyrians. The same origin seems to be natural in Gaul where the Celts appeared as conquerors comparatively late, not before the sixth century, B.C. But everything in this question of origins is still darkness.

However, serfdom persisted in the ancient world for centuries and centuries. In the Orient it was inherited, after the conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great, by the Hellenistic monarchs, and kept jealously by some of them, especially by the Ptolemies in Egypt. In Greece it lingered on in some of the Greek city-states. And yet in the enlightened atmosphere of the Greek life of the Hellenistic period serfdom as an institution could not prosper and could not remain unchanged. In most of the city-states it was eliminated in one way or another and replaced by private property or transformed into relations of temporary short- or long-term leases. Instances are the activity of the Spartan kings Agis and Cleomenes and the freedom given to serfs in the city of Heraclaea on the Pontus. Even in most of the temple-states serfdom vanished, since many of the temples and temple territories were transformed by the Hellenistic rulers into cities and city territories. In Asia Minor and in Syria, serfdom persisted almost exclusively on the land owned by some

temples and on the large estates of the kings, which were partly given away by them to their officers and officials. But even here it was regulated and modified, and subjected to some changes which restricted the rights of the landowners (including the state, that is, the king) and created some legal rights of the serfs.

Best known is serfdom in its modern Hellenistic forms in Egypt. As far as land cultivation goes, the original serfdom was treated practically as a form of land tenure which was given to the tillers of the soil without any definition of time, with the obligation of the tiller to work on the land and to pay a part of his produce to the owner of the land—the king. Other obligations (especially compulsory work for the state) which lay on the peasants of Egypt in addition to the obligation of cultivating the land on specific conditions devised by the landowner, were not confined to the peasants and were not connected with land tenure as such. They existed from time immemorial and were inherited by the Ptolemies from their predecessors, the former rulers of Egypt. One of the main features in the life of Egyptian peasants and artisans was, however, jealously kept by the Ptolemies and never reduced and restricted. I mean the rule that every peasant belongs to his place of residence (“idia” in Greek, “origo” in Latin), is supposed to stay there and to perform his work. In its strict form, however, the rule was never observed even in Hellenistic Egypt.

What the evolution of serfdom in Western Europe was during this same time we do not know. It persisted in Gaul, but the forms in which it existed are unknown. In Carthage it might have been used along with slavery for cultivating the large estates of the

Phenician and half-Phenician aristocracy. In Italy, certainly, if serfdom really existed in Etruria, which seems to be an historical fact, and in Rome, which is more doubtful, it had the same tendency to disappear and to dissolve in private landownership and land tenure. Peasant-owners and peasant-tenants are the typical tillers of the soil all over Italy in the times of the formation and the blossom of the Italian federation of cities and tribes under the leadership of Rome, as they were typical for all the city-states, especially in Greece, at the same period.

II. The Early Roman Empire

It is a well-known fact, which I have not to deal with here, that the Italian federation was gradually transformed into the Roman Empire in the second and first centuries B.C. Parallel to this transformation, the leading type of landownership assumed in Italy not the forms of small landownership or tenancy (the owner in this last case being either a private person or the state), but the forms of large landownership by absentee landlords who resided in the city of Rome or in the cities of Italy. There is nothing peculiar in this process. The same evolution is typical for all the lands where property in land was recognized and protected by state and law. We meet it both in Greece, in the Greek city-states, and in the Orient, in those parts of it where serfdom was not predominant but subsidiary (Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine). The large estates of the Roman aristocracy were tilled mostly by gangs or groups of slaves (the most progressive types of estates concentrated on wine and olive-oil production and on cattle breeding). On some of them, especially those with a poorer soil, the tillers were free ten-

ants, *coloni*, who rented the land from the landowners and paid a rent to them mostly in money.

The transformation of the Roman State into a world Empire enriched enormously the ruling aristocracy of Rome, which included the more energetic and thrifty Roman citizens. The number and the sizes of the large estates grew constantly both in Italy and in the dominions of Rome, the provinces, that is, the former Greek city-states or Hellenistic monarchies, or even tribal states of Central and Western Europe. In some of the provinces the Roman capitalists owned estates which had been tilled by serfs before the Roman conquest and which remained in this status after it. Most of their estates, however, were tilled as in Italy by slaves and tenants. The situation of the free peasants and tenants in Italy grew gradually worse. Constant wars and the growing fortunes and political influence of the leading classes brought about the impoverishment of the peasants and made them dependent on the large landowners. Many free peasant-owners of their plots became tenants, and all the tenants were humble clients of the aristocrats and plutocrats of Rome, though they were at the same time politically (at least in theory) the masters of the Roman World Empire.

This inconsistency led to the civil wars of the first century B.C. In these wars the proletariat of Italy—the peasants forming the armies of the ambitious men who fought for personal and for some other political aims—was fighting for a redistribution of property in land and for a reorganization of the social and economic life of Italy by which the economic situation of the masses of the population would not be in such an appalling contrast to their international and political status. How

far this aim was achieved at the end of the civil wars is very difficult to say. About half a million proletarians received from the victorious leaders large plots of land for cultivation both in Italy and in some of the provinces. They formed after that time the leading and most influential part of the city-bourgeoisie of Italy and of the Romanized provinces. The land which they received was, of course, taken away from the former landowners, especially from the former city-bourgeoisie and from some members of the Roman aristocracy. Most of the dispossessed landowners, however, emigrated to the provinces, and in most cases they formed there the upper class of the population, thus creating in the Western provinces a well-to-do bourgeoisie of Roman citizens who took up their residence in the newly created urban centers of life.

The main phenomenon which was brought about by the civil wars was therefore not a further proletarianization of the masses of the Italian population, which, as a matter of fact, was stopped by the civil wars, but a transformation of considerable numbers of proletarians into well-to-do landowners. The middle class of city residents was never so strong and numerous in Italy and in the Romanized and Hellenized provinces as it was after the civil wars. No wonder that Augustus based his reform of the Roman Empire on this partly new, partly old city-bourgeoisie made up of the Roman citizens both of Italy and of the provinces. Most of the members of this city-bourgeois class were not peasants, but landowners. Probably very few of them tilled the soil of their landed property with their own hands. The labor employed on their land, which was managed according to the scientific methods of Hellenistic agriculture, was slave labor, as is shown by the

investigations of the ruins of Pompeii, especially the villas near Pompeii (the so-called *villae rusticae*). Some parcels of the larger estates were let to tenants, who often combined husbandry on their own land with husbandry on the land leased from the city-landowners (for instance, the "coloni" of Horace). Along with these medium-sized estates of the city-bourgeoisie, large estates of the aristocracy and plutocracy of Rome still existed and were managed in the same way as before, that is, by means of slaves and tenants. New-rich of the type of well-known Trimalchio, the hero of the novel of Petronius, sometimes rivaled the Roman senatorial and equestrian aristocracy and the favorites of the emperors in the volume of their fortunes and the extent of their estates. Thus in the early Roman Empire the class of humble tenants of absentee landlords had not disappeared completely but was no more so prominent, at least in Italy, as it had been in the first century B.C. Replaced by slaves, large numbers of tenants emigrated to the provinces, where they mostly formed a part of the city-bourgeoisie, which constantly grew in numbers with the gradual urbanization of both the western and eastern provinces of Rome. How these emigrants organized their economic life we do not know. It is probable, however, that in exceptional cases only they would work the land with their own hands. Abundant labor was supplied both by the natives and the slaves.

It is evident that the early Roman Empire with its economic structure as described above was not favorable to serfdom and to its maintenance and development. It was based on private property; and serfdom, where it still existed, appears as a mere survival. In fact, serfdom in a modernized form still

was the leading economic and social feature of the life in Egypt where it existed on imperial and state lands along with the development of a class of private landowners. It assumed, however, much milder and much more modern forms even in comparison with its Ptolemaic organization. This gradual transformation was no doubt due to the influence of Roman law and Roman administrative practice. The same must be said of the imperial domains and the temple lands in the East. How far serfdom survived in what had been formerly the Carthaginian African state we do not know. It might have left some traces in the organization of the relations between the new landowners of Africa and the old inhabitants who, as tenants, tilled the soil of their new masters. Still less is known of the conditions in which lived the clients of the Gallic landowners, the last being now to a large extent immigrants from Italy. The most natural assumption is that the tradition of serfdom survived in some of the devices by which the relations of landowners to their tenants were regulated.

The early Roman Empire both in the West and in the East was a blessed time for the development of cities and of the city-bourgeoisie. New cities and new groups of city-bourgeoisie sprang up all over the Roman Empire in scores and perhaps in hundreds. New lands were made accessible for cultivation and new possibilities for applying the methods of scientific agriculture were opened. It reminds one of the early days of the United States of America and of the activity of the French colonists in Tunisia and Algeria. The government, based as it was on city-bourgeoisie, fostered this movement. The emperors looked with suspicion on the magnates and nabobs, especially the members of

the Republican aristocracy, and ruthlessly exterminated them. They preferred large fortunes to grow up in the provinces and to be in the hands of the municipal aristocracy. Hence their ruthless persecution of the rich and aristocratic families of Rome and Italy and a far-reaching confiscation of their landed property. By the second century A.D., land in the Roman Empire was owned either by the emperors (that is, the state) or by members of the municipal bourgeoisie. In some places, like some parts of Italy, Thrace, Syria, and Palestine, free peasant-landowners formed the largest landowning class. Cities in these places were rare and the city-bourgeoisie not very numerous.

III. Period of the Enlightened Monarchy—The Crisis of the Third Century and the Renaissance of Serfdom

The evolution which began in the first century A.D. with Augustus reached its climax in the second century, the time of the enlightened constitutional monarchy of the Antonines. The Roman Empire reached its natural frontiers in the west, in the south, and to a certain extent in the north. In the northeast and south-east it faced the large groups of Germans and Iranians which it was not able to assimilate. Along with the city life the notion of private property in land penetrated to the remotest corners of the Roman Empire. City life and serfdom were in the last item incompatible, and in the city territories the last remainders of serfdom gradually disappeared. The ultimate refuges of serfdom were some of the imperial domains in the East (including Egypt) and a few temple territories.

With the arrest of the expansion of the Roman Empire a grave economic

question arose, the question of providing labor for scientific and capitalistic agriculture. The tendency towards concentration of landed property in the hands of capitalists and city residents could not be stopped. The economic evolution of a prosperous world Empire based on private property tended naturally towards capitalism, and the best (that is, the safest) investment of capital was in landed property. But where could one get labor for the private estates? In the peaceful times of the Roman Empire, with its thoroughly civilized life, slavery could not provide labor both for domestic life and industry and for agriculture. The influx of slaves from abroad became slow, and in the enlightened atmosphere of the Antonines no slavery could originate in the civil relations inside of the Roman Empire. Nay, the emperors did their best to facilitate manumission of slaves and to transform the largest possible numbers of slaves into free residents of the Roman Empire.

The only substitute for slavery was either hired free labor or tenants. Both were used extensively. However, the supply of hired labor being insecure, since transportation was very slow and difficult, the easiest way was to let out land to tenants, *coloni*, on various terms: short-term leases, leases without term or on a more or less long term, and emphyteutic leases—virgin or waste land let to those who were ready to transform it into gardens and fields and to keep it for an indefinite time, with the obligation of paying a moderate rent. The rent was paid either in money or in kind according to circumstances. In the hands of the tenants scientific management of the land was rather an exception. Scientific management requires capital (that is, good inventory, abundance of labor and cattle), and this

was what most of the tenants lacked, since they were men who were not able to find a more profitable occupation, open to everybody. Capital was often supplied by the landowners, but rarely with success. The prevailing system was lease without term or leases renewed almost mechanically from term to term. On the imperial lands emphyteutic land tenure was largely used.

Tenants who lived generation after generation on the same parcel of land formed close relations with the landowners, the landowners being their natural protectors and masters, the tenants being the humble clients of the landowners. Frequently the tenants of today were the slaves of yesterday. On the imperial lands the tenants regarded themselves as clients of the emperor himself, "their own folk." Such relations are natural and have nothing to do with serfdom, that is, a formal bondage to the soil. The tenants were free to leave their parcels at any time, provided that they were able to find another place in which to live and to work. Naturally they did not desire such a change as they grew more and more used to their place of residence, their house, their neighbors, and their masters. But when they grew angry they threatened the master, be it even the emperor, that if the conditions of their life were not changed they would quit and look for another place of residence. And they certainly carried out their threats frequently.

The tenants of the second and third centuries A.D. were, therefore, free men protected by Roman civil law and by the administration of the Empire. We must not forget how much Roman law and the emperors did just for the weak against the strong, for the *humiliores* against the *potentiores*. The tenants were, of course, often cheated or re-

garded themselves as cheated, but in the main Roman civil law never discriminated between rich and poor and was rather inclined to turn the balance in favor of the poor. Economic evolution was also favorable to the tenants. The supply of labor was scanty and the landowners needed good tenants much more than the tenants needed any landlord. Unemployment was not a phenomenon typical of the early Roman Empire.

Such was the situation in the Roman Empire as late as the first half of the third century A.D., as is proved by scores of documents. And yet when we skip a period of less than 50 years, from the end of the dynasty of the Severi to the time of Diocletian and Constantine—what a change! We hear very little of free tenants and free peasants. The typical tiller of the soil both on the imperial estates and on the large estates of the rich landowners, as well as on the estates either assigned to the cities or held by the municipal bourgeoisie, is still a *colonus*, that is, a tenant; but he is no more free. He is bound to the soil, to his parcel of land and to his house; and this bondage, which is not far from slavery, is efficiently protected by law and government. How can we account for such a change?

The prevailing theory says that it was a natural development from the conditions of the second century. A long-term tenant might at any time become a serf, that is, might be enslaved by legal means by a rich and influential landowner; and this natural evolution was just what had happened in the little-known 50 years of the dark third century A.D. Those who advocate such a theory are not aware that the change was an enormous one. It was practically a change from liberty to

slavery, and to this change the government had given its sanction. No government could give its sanction to such a change unless there was bitter necessity for doing so. By normal evolution such a change could not be effected; it could only have been prepared. By preparation I mean the existence of a class of humble tenants who for the most part lived on the estates of the emperor and of the rich landowners for generations. However, a catastrophe must have intervened for transforming legally in such a short time millions of free agriculturists, many of them and later all of them citizens of Rome, into half-slaves bound to their master, be it the state or a private landowner.

In quite recent times some scholars have suggested that the catastrophe which brought about such a change was neither political nor social; it was a natural one. It was the exhaustion of the soil, which was suddenly realized in the third century, that forced the government to use compulsion for retaining tillers of the soil on their parcels which had become practically sterile. Such an explanation in no way harmonizes with ascertained facts. Never in the second century did the people complain of any exhaustion of soil. And how could the soil of such provinces as Africa, Spain, Gaul, the Danube lands, and so forth, have been exhausted in a very short time by systematic agricultural exploitation with the help of refined devices of scientific agriculture? The soil of Egypt and of Mesopotamia is inexhaustible in any way, provided that measures are taken for regulating the yearly floods of the rivers. The alluvial soil of these lands, if duly watered and carefully managed, yields abundant harvests.

A catastrophe certainly came about and changed the aspect of the Roman

Empire, but it was not due to nature. It was created by the conscious and subconscious activity of men. Let us state the facts. In the third century general misery descended upon the Roman Empire. All over the Roman Empire, not only in Italy and Greece, large tracts of cultivable land lay waste and untilled. In Egypt the system of dykes and canals was neglected, and without it the land was doomed. The same is true of the works of irrigation in Africa, Spain, Asia Minor, the Syrian lands. These systems of irrigation, so essential for the conditions of agriculture in the south, had been created by men and were gradually improved by them. Now they became neglected and the result was waste land, the desert advancing again and conquering one field and one garden after another. This neglect was not due to the exhaustion of the soil. The soil of Egypt, provided that the Nile does its work—and it very seldom fails to do so—is inexhaustible; but men must help nature. Here, as in other places, it was this help that failed. Disorganization and lack of labor made the rich fields of the past waste and desolate. And for explaining the gradual desertion of formerly fertile land we must first account for this lack and disorganization of labor, which, after all, is the main foundation of human society in general.

I have given the explanation of this disorganization of labor in another place.² If I may summarize this explanation, it was the direct result of a lasting social and political revolution which shattered the foundations of the Roman Empire in the third century. In the last analysis this revolution was an elemental fight of the tenants and peasants against the city bourgeoisie, a

²In my book on the Roman Empire, quoted in the first paragraph of this article.

struggle which had been prepared by centuries of evolution in the ancient world. The exponent of the hatred of the lower classes against the upper was the army and its leaders—the emperors appointed by the army. In the turmoil of this mad struggle, chaotic and illogical as such struggles always are, the fabric of the Roman Empire went to pieces, and first of all the highly sensitive machine of the finely developed economic life of the Roman Empire disintegrated. Civil war provoked foreign wars, and in their trail came pillage, devastation, famine and plague. The sea was in the hands of pirates, the land roads were infested by brigands. And no rest was given to the unhappy population. Emperor after emperor was killed in the internecine war, and every new spasm of it invited the Germans and the Iranians to renew their attacks and their devastations, after which famines and plagues, robbery and murder, followed with the regularity of a natural phenomenon. And last but not least, civil war required wealth, and the emperors instead of protecting the Empire were the first organized robbers of it. Force and compulsion were their weapons.

No wonder that the population of the Empire became utterly demoralized and disorganized—first and foremost in its economic activity and in its reproduction. Work was given up: it was of no use to work with no stability and no hope. Children were not reared, or if reared, were not cared for and educated. No wonder that in such conditions the best land lay waste and depopulation was the leading phenomenon of life. Productive work was done by the masses for a large army of greedy drones. To these drones belonged also the absentee landlords, themselves hard pressed by the disorganization and vio-

lence of the times. It is only natural that these masses became discouraged and would have stopped working altogether were it not for the necessity of maintaining one's own life and the life of one's family. When the Empire, after 50 years of such life—and we know what 50 years might mean, we who lived through the World War and the acute social revolution of Russia—came to its senses, it lay practically in ruins. The bourgeoisie was decimated and utterly demoralized; the worst element only had survived. Labor both in the cities and in the country was scarce and completely out of balance. Agricultural production, industry, and commerce were not able to supply the necessities of life. No goods came on the market, and, therefore, the period was characterized by enormous and ever-fluctuating prices.

For the government, after the crisis was over, the only two ways out of the terrible dilemma which stood before it were either to let the Empire alone and give it time for recovery while helping the laboring classes as the Antonines had done, and protecting them against the drones, or to use force and compulsion and to start again, by these means, the economic machine. Was it possible for the state to take the first way? No doubt the process was a slow one, and the needs of the Empire were pressing. In any case the state chose the second path. It took the conditions created by force and compulsion for granted and gradually legalized them. The population of the Empire was driven back to normality by cudgels. The state enslaved the whole population: the aristocracy and the city bourgeoisie, the laborers, the artisans and the shop-owners, the landowners and the tenants, the officers and the officials, the merchants and the shop assistants, the ship-

owners and the sailors all alike. The bondage, the serfdom in agricultural life, was only one side of the picture, though, of course, in the primitive conditions of the time, the most important. It is probable that in regulating the relations of the state and of the landowners to the new serfs the government used the devices which still had survived in the few islands of bondage and serfdom.

How did the Roman population allow the government to perform such an operation on it? Do not forget that relative quiet came after years of storm, that generations both of rulers and of subjects grew up in the atmosphere of violence, murders, compulsion, robbery! There were generations that had never seen 10 consecutive years of peace, and nobody had lived even for a few months in the normal air of legality and honesty. Force and violence were both the motto and the practice. Law and order were dreams. Besides, by a long evolution, by long years of quiet life and of complete subjection to the central power, the population of the Roman Empire had lost the habit of self-help and initiative, and had become accustomed to be ruled and to be directed.

It was no wonder then that in such conditions as these the residents of the Roman Empire had no force of resistance left and submitted blindly, though reluctantly, to the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine, or rather to their administrative practice, especially in the field of taxation, which gradually assumed the form of special local regulations developing finally into more or less general legislation.

Such is the origin of the revival of serfdom in the ancient world. It came back again and came to stay. No normal evolution alone can account for such a revival. No natural causes can explain it. The explanation lies in the activity of men, in their complex psychology. Is an elemental outbreak of the spirit of destruction, which is a social revolution, also a necessity, an elemental force? Or may men foresee such an outbreak and prevent it? Who knows? In any case the Roman colonate of the late Roman Empire with its slavery and degradation was the legitimate child of the social revolution of the third century A.D., which was prepared, of course, by the long centuries of evolution in the Hellenistic period and in the early Roman Empire.